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A Woman's Power & Place vs. A Man's Power & Place

Christine Stoddard

City College of New York, CUNY, cstodda000@citymail.cuny.edu

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A WOMAN'S POWER + PLACE VS. A MAN'S POWER + PLACE

by Christine Stoddard
City College of New York



1.1 Private Objective

As a woman, I feel my diminished power and place in society, especially in relation to men. For this project, I wanted to research representations of women in stock and archival imagery. I've worked in mass communications (journalism and advertising) for the past decade and seen few changes in the portrayal of women. Despite massive shifts in the print and digital landscapes, portrayals of women continue to be overtly or subtly sexist. *The Washington Post*, my first employer, has changed owners three times, made massive staff cuts, and dramatically decreased their print circulation since I worked for them. Because stock photography is generic, often



stereotypical, it often portrays women in an annoying or even disrespectful way that mimics mainstream modes of thought. That is why feminist websites like Bustle (one of my former employers) and Refinery29¹ were eschewing stock photography. They are going against the digital media grain by shooting their own photos, just as magazines did in print's heyday. Archival images, meanwhile, rarely portray women at all. When they do, they are not identified by name as often as men. When they are identified by name, it's often in relation to a man. An archival photo I found of Ann Einstein, wife of Albert Einstein, cites her relationship to the scientist before her actual name.

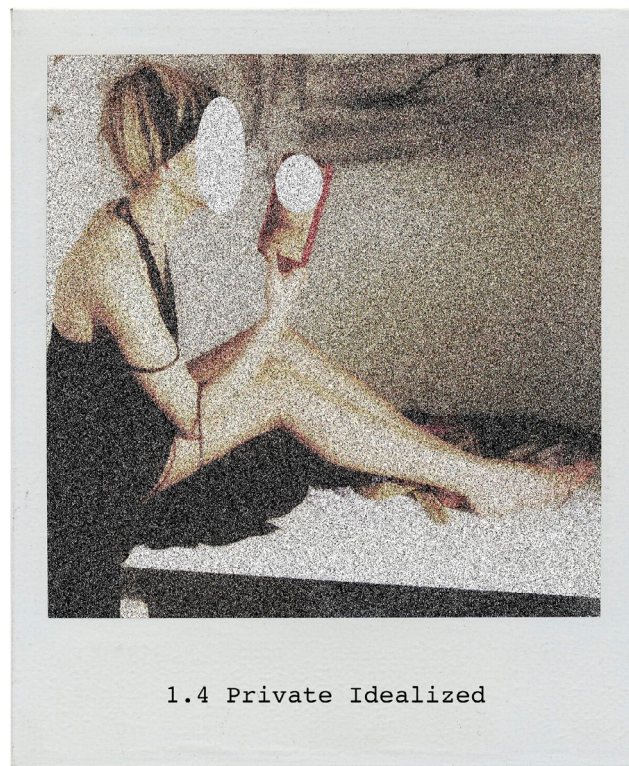
For my initial research, I spent hours scrolling through the Library of Congress online archives and commercial stock websites like Pexels, Unsplash, and Shutterstock. I typed in terms such

1. <https://www.racked.com/2015/11/5/9648598/stock-photography-sexist-getty-images-shutterstock>
<https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/thecrambo/vol1/iss1/10>



1.3 Private Stereotypical

as “woman,” “wife, and “mother,” in addition to various professions and activities. Often I had to specify “woman” or “female” when searching the latter. For example, a simple search for “scientist” yielded all-male images. Yet when I typed in “woman scientist” and “female scientist,” I did get some results, though very few. The implication is that woman cannot be or should not be scientists. Generally speaking, regardless of profession or activity, women in stock and archival images are faceless, sexualized, and unidentified (if they are, it’s in relation to a man.) They are also overwhelmingly white, tall, and skinny. Take a photo of a woman eating breakfast in bed (Grid A, 1:3). She is wearing flirty knee-highs and black panties and appears headless. Because of these generic portrayals, I whited out the female faces in the comparatively few photos that had them. I also made them half-tone and desaturated to reflect how half-formed and colorless these women appear.



1.4 Private Idealized

For Grid B, I chose all stock photos of men, which are plentiful, varied, and far less likely to be needlessly sexualized. They are less likely to be doing something domestic or family related and more likely to do something active. I bumped up the saturation on each to show how vibrant these portrayals are compared to those of women. Next, I want to look at portrayals of men and women in various relationships in stock and archival photography. These images will further comment on gender and power dynamics in society.